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Opposite Directions

The timer had been ringing for almost twenty minutes when Sherry could no longer stand it and got up to turn it off. "I hate buzzers," she told Jeff later on the phone. She picked at the splintered edge of a toenail that had been scratching the next toe all day. "My mother uses them all the time."

"I can't hear you," said Jeff and Sherry moved the phone closer to her mouth. Outside it rained turning the pavement into an asphalt mirror of the city. A man jaywalked across the street. His feet made slapping noises in the water.

Sherry lay talking on a piece of rug salvaged from a neighbor's garage sale, the telephone pressed hard between her ear and shoulder. Holes in the linoleum exposed the black glue underneath, except where it was covered by the rug that cushioned Sherry's spine. Sherry lifted her legs overhead and lowered them slowly because inches could be lost, they said on television talk shows, the ones Sherry watched before she dressed or combed her hair, if you did it every day. The phone slipped from Sherry's mouth.

"I haven't any money for the bus and I have to go to work,"

Jeff said. "I can't be late again."

Sherry lowered her trembling legs slowly and counted before her heels touched the floor. "Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-five," she said, mouthing the words. Then when Jeff paused she said, "You don't think I'm too fat, do you Jeff? Sometimes I say, 'Oh God, what if I turn out like Edward downstairs.' You know, he told me he eats Oreos for dinner because it's too hard to cook for one. I've seen him through the window."

"I thought you were anorexic or something," Jeff said.

"Don't go to work, Jeff. You can call in sick," Sherry said. "We can go someplace and talk. My mother will be home and start with the buzzers. She times everything." She glanced at the clock and walked a circle heel to toe. "You'll only miss a day," she said.

Outside the rain stopped and sun filtered in through the drapes. They were sheers, designed to keep the sun out without blocking the view, but they didn't seem to work that way.

"I have to go," said Jeff. "Last time when I didn't it was the worst day of our lives together."

That was before he moved into the trailer. All that day they had talked in the room without any windows. Jeff was always moving, he said he liked moving, and wherever he went his blue Naugahyde sofa went too, adding a personal touch—a symbol of continuity to any place he lived in. Sherry told him she had fallen in love with a scientist, though she knew she hadn't, and Jeff just sat on the sofa and Sherry tied his shoe laces in knots and tried to untangle them. But she had never told someone that she loved somebody else and didn't know where to begin.

"This scientist," she said, and mocked Jeff's voice, "he's crazy about me." His shoe laces were old, faded and dotted with black where they ran through the eyelets. Jeff said she hurt his feelings and that he had them too and then pretended it was all over.

So now Sherry thought Jeff would say "forget it."

"Forget it," Jeff said. "I can't meet you today. I know you

think your mother's mad."

"Mad," Sherry said, "her turtles are dead but she won't believe it." They've floated in a bowl of water on her dresser for days. She feeds them but they never move."

"I like your mom," Jeff said.

Sherry envisioned Jeff's face close up while he continued talking. Not attractive, she thought. They both had chicken pox together only Jeff got the scars because his itched more. Pock marks on his left cheek still stood out, at least when he had just shaved. Sherry used to wish she could pull them off and put them in her photo album for safe keeping. When she had kids she would show them. "Pock marks," she would say. "Jeff's," when they looked at her questioningly. Then she would talk about love and what it really meant. The same lecture her mother gave her when she turned twelve, only a new and improved version.

Sherry's legs fell to the floor and she groaned. "Just come over Jeff," she said.

"I can't," he said.

Sherry stood then said, "You're ruining my life." She carried the telephone into her mother's bedroom. The turtles floated beneath a removable palm tree that was bent sideways as if hit by wind. "We're going to have a funeral," Sherry said, "we're going to do it right." The water was cold. She took the turtles from the bowl and shook the water off one before holding it to the ceiling light. Her mother's room stayed dark most of the time because the only window faced into an air shaft. A few things her mother kept were below the window, scattered on sewing machine cabinets she had pushed together to form a table. She protected this table with plastic and under the plastic kept some comic strips cut from newspapers. She also had the usual things, plates from different states, a locked jewelry box, an electric razor and winter gloves. "They pulled their arms and legs in, otherwise they look like perfectly good turtles," Sherry said to Jeff. Then she took the

gloves from the table and put the turtles inside.

“Don’t treat her like a child,” said Jeff. “I’m leaving now. I’ll stop by later,” and he hung up, leaving Sherry feeling indignant and hopeful at the same time. She set down the phone and waited again on the couch that doubled as her bed at night, with the turtles and a National Geographic magazine from the library.

Her mother walked in when Sherry knew she would, wearing the blue wool coat she got when her best friend from high school died. Sherry watched her go set the buzzer for the reverend she always watched on television, often with the sound turned down.

“Come with me, mom,” she said. “Don’t take off your coat. I promised Jeff I’d bring you over for dinner.”

The woman made no remark but set the timer on the stove at thirty-five minutes. “Mom, we promised we’d be there,” Sherry said.

“How do I look?” said her mother smoothing down the coat and brushing a few bangs aside that had strayed from her red scarf. It was secured around her head with a pin and painted like a peacock.

Sherry picked up the National Geographic and the glove with the turtles inside. The library cards fell out of the magazine and later Sherry remembered she had said something about stopping at the cleaners that day. But now Sherry hurried her mother out the door into the damp air and to the car. She knew her mother walked slowly and Sherry was glad no one was around to stop and talk. They walked to the Oldsmobile without saying anything. It wasn’t pulled forward completely and the back of it hung out of the stall. Sherry still didn’t say anything when she saw that Jeff walked towards them from the opposite direction.

She helped her mother into the clean, preserved, vinyl interior. The car smelled clean because it had rarely been used. It was a gift to her mother from one of her friends that could no longer

drive. Sherry's mother was lucky that way. Jeff had been standing there for a while, noticing something about the car's paint when Sherry finally said, "What are you doing here?"

"I want to go with you," he said reaching for the door handle and sitting down in the back seat next to her mother. "Hi, Mom," said Jeff, he always called her that, and patted her knee covered by support hose that shined. Sherry got in the front and looked over her shoulder at the two in the backseat grinning at each other—her mother never caught Jeff's eye. The thought of the turtles coming back to life inside of a dark glove bothered Sherry and she let the car into reverse and backed out of the stall. Her tires sounded like tape being peeled off a box when the car rolled out of the wet parking lot.

"Do you know where you went today, mother?" Sherry asked when they stopped at a light.

"Did my mail come?" her mother asked.

"Jeff, you're going to be fired again."

Jeff rolled down the window and let his arms hang down the side of the car. "It sounded serious so I came," said Jeff. The pine tree air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror spun in circles from the wind.

The glove lay still beside Sherry. The fingers were flat, the palm large and round, like a pregnant hand, she thought. Then she said, "She can't remember."

Just past the light the beach was empty and Sherry pulled up by a meter knocking the back tires into the curb several times before the car parked parallel. By the time Sherry walked around to open the door for her mother Jeff was already half way across the sand leaving Sherry to watch him from a distance, from the rise that descended down to the waves.

"It's a surprise," she said when her mother asked her about dinner. They crossed the sand to the water then her mother said, "Sherry, I'm cold, take me home. It must be time."

Sherry's hair twisted behind her in the wind. Jeff found a stray dog he could throw sticks for. Its hair was matted and wet from jumping in and out of the waves.

"Don't be angry," Sherry said, holding the glove upside down.

"The ballet is coming to town," said her mother. She always loved the ballet and Sherry usually made a point to take her. It was the only thing her mother remembered for any period of time. Sherry knelt on the sand and wrapped the turtles in a sheet of the magazine, saving the glove.

"We can't keep the turtles anymore," she said and folded the paper over them and made a hole in the sand with the heel of her rain boot.

"They're in the paper?" said her mother, shutting her eyes and looking away.

"Yeah," said Sherry. She placed them in the hole and covered them with sand. The wet matted dog ran by kicking sand up behind it, some got in Sherry's face. She wiped it with her arm and tasted salt and felt the abrasiveness on her skin. Then she said, "I bet there are whales out there. Bigger ones than trains or anything. All those waves there," Sherry pointed in front of her panning the waterline with her finger, "they make them, kicking with their tails and swimming."

Her mother clasped one hand around the back of Sherry's neck and feigned indifference. Sherry almost said something, but forgot what it was before she said it.

"Jeff," Sherry screeched down the beach, but her voice was blown back toward her and he didn't answer.

They walked until her mother said, "I smell roses," sniffing the air. Sea gulls swooped down, landing on the rim of a trash can, one went inside. "Where's that come from," she asked. She turned and looked back in the direction from which they had come.

Sherry stopped too and then her mother walked back.

Sherry continued in the opposite direction. A green bottle showed through the sand and Sherry picked it up, shaking the sand out. It was non-refundable. She felt hungry, like eating spaghetti or something, but then Jeff would want Big Macs, her mother wouldn't want anything. And if they did decide on something to eat they'd get it to go and then sit at the same table in the same kitchen, and discuss for the third time Jeff's new opportunity for success. "I gotta get a place," he'd say and look for somewhere else to move where he didn't have to pay his first and last. Sherry carried the bottle down the beach for a while then threw it out of the waves where it would be swept back and forth, along with the turtles, soon.